

BOOKS

America: Mystery and Mystification

AN ENGLISHMAN abroad, when he inquires about home, gives the impression of inviting reassurance: he waits to be told about the old and familiar things he nostalgically misses. An American abroad, when he asks his visitor from the States, "What's new?" gives the air of someone who does not want to miss out on the Second Coming. He is prepared for the most startling intelligence, which the reality usually falls far short of. Have the theatres in New York been converted into Zen temples? Has the University of Chicago gone nudist? Do people eat yogurt instead of steak? These are the most trivial questions he can think of. More often, his curiosity takes on near-apocalyptic dimensions; and I confess that if I were one day to be informed that, through some quirk in space-time, Florida had ceased to exist, I would not be nearly so shocked and astonished as, out of propriety, I would pretend. *At last*, I would think to myself, *a real piece of news*.

To be sure, this state of mind is made tolerable by an irony, a detachment, that invariably qualifies it: an American is half-actor, half-spectator, waiting for Godot but prepared to keep amiably busy if that gentleman never shows up. Nevertheless, it is a real state of mind—or, to be more precise, a state of anticipation. "America is promises," an enthusiastic lyricist once wrote; but which ones shall be kept?

Americans are fond of reproaching the foreigner with not understanding their country, which is quite true. But it is not generally recognised how profoundly Americans themselves are bewildered by their own country. Is it not extraordinary that the best book on American society has been written by a Frenchman (Tocqueville), the best books on American government by Englishmen (Bryce, Brogan)? Even when it comes to current affairs, I can testify how troublesome

it is for an American periodical to get first-rate articles, on the American scene, from American writers. Publications (and their readers) outside America, naturally, fare even worse. I can easily imagine an Englishman arriving in New York and being puzzled by those little signs in the windows of Fifth Avenue shops: *Aquí se habla español*. The Good Neighbour policy in action? No, merely a reflection of the fact that, in the past decade, more than a half-million Puerto Ricans have moved into New York City—a fact with the profoundest consequences for America's most "European" city, but one which it is hard to get people to take seriously.

There is no lack of "explanations" for this situation. America is big; it is varied; it changes quickly; etc. Moreover, as the American historian Daniel J. Boorstin recently pointed out, there has been an "inversion of geographical and political distances"—American interest and attention centres on Washington, overlooking all the radical changes that are taking place under one's nose. But, though all these things are true, they do not add up to the truth, which is that Americans (and, after them, foreigners) do not comprehend America for the reason that America is not only a country but a mythology as well.

Probably the oddest aspect of this mythology is that it encompasses America and leaves out the Americans. A reader of Richard Pear's able introduction to American government* will learn much about the Constitution and the courts, but almost nothing about the people who use and abuse them. Dr. Pear is hardly to be blamed, since he is in this following some very respectable American models. Similarly, one can go through the two volumes of the new (and very mediocre)

* *American Government*. By RICHARD H. PEAR. MacGibbon and Kee. 15s.

Pelican history of the United States* without ever learning that mass immigration, which ceased only a generation ago, was a decisive event in American life. In this, again, the authors are only repeating the errors of American historians, who used to give immigration a chapter and then forget about it, on the supposition that the newcomers "made their contribution" to American life and then, like the drone bee, quietly expired. It is only a few years ago that Samuel Lubell called attention to what had been staring everyone in the face, but was never noticed: that the New Deal revolution was not only social and economic, but ethnic as well, and that a "natural" Democratic majority was in the making with the arrival at voting age of the sons and daughters of the immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe.

To a considerable extent, what is involved here is a certain measure of hypocrisy by which Americans deceive themselves and others. Just because the population is so heterogeneous in origin, one pretends that it doesn't matter. That is why general information and statistics about America are almost meaningless unless one knows *who* is hidden behind that abstract mask. Is New York suffering a wave of crime and juvenile delinquency? One immediately hears earnest sermons about the social problems of our mass civilisation, whereas what may be happening is nothing more than an influx of Negro and Puerto Rican immigrants who, like earlier immigrants to New York, are undergoing a painful torment of adjustment. Has Maine elected a Democratic governor? It could mean a repudiation of the Eisenhower administration, but it may mean only that the French Canadians (or their children) are beginning to exercise their vote. Does the anti-British sentiment of the mid-West represent the heritage of the frontiersmen of the Revolution—or the prejudice of the large German population that later settled there? In the same way, since the 14 million Negroes constitute a depressed section of the population, economically (and otherwise too, of course), most figures on average wages, average annual income, and the like give a misleading, though technically accurate,

picture of how the "average" American fares.

Another way in which Americans get left out of all discussions about America is by ignoring the rôle of religion. Since most American professors, writers, critics, etc. are indifferent to the matter, it is given only the most cursory attention in the kind of books that are taken up by the reading public in both America and Europe. Yet though God is nowhere mentioned in the American Constitution, Americans are a religious people—far more so than the English, or French, or Germans—and unless one knows this, one cannot begin to understand why they act as they do. Only the other day, a public opinion poll showed that an overwhelming majority of Americans disapproved in principle of allowing an atheist to occupy a teaching position, even in a university. One may feel discouraged or heartened by this state of affairs; but blandly to overlook it is as sensible as talking about India without noticing that the country is inhabited by Hindus—which, I concede, is frequently done.

BUT even more important than the myth of the American, that blank-featured incarnation of the spirit of '76 whom only Graham Greene has ever encountered in the flesh, is the myth of The Great Experiment. This phrase, indeed, is the title of a new introduction to American history, written (and written extraordinarily well) for the English reader, by Frank Thistlethwaite.* It is an intelligent and perceptive book, and one is glad to see it published. But I would challenge its basic theme, which is that American history is to be judged in terms of the American ideal, defined by Mr. Thistlethwaite as "a society fluid and experimental, uncommitted to rigid values, cherishing freedom of will and choice and bestowing all the promise of the future on those with the manhood to reject the past." I can understand how he got to believe this, since it is the creed of the liberal intelligentsia that dominates American academic life and American belles-lettres. It is not, however, the American creed—not really.

It is by now commonplace to say that France is a conservative country with a revolutionary ideology. The same can be said,

* *The Great Experiment*. By FRANK THISTLETHWAITE. Cambridge University Press. 25s.

* *A History of the United States*. 2 vols. By R. B. NYE and J. E. MOPURGO. Pelican Books. 3s. 6d.

Historical Writing

Many well-known historians—including Professor Arnold Toynbee and Professor Commager of Columbia University—will contribute articles to a Special History Number of *The Times Literary Supplement* to be published on January 6. They will discuss such subjects as :—

The Role of the Manchester School of History
The Rise and Fall of “pure” Diplomatic History
The Development of Biographical Studies

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German attempts to re-examine their own tradition
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with no less relevance, about America. America was founded by religious dissenters who proceeded to establish highly conformist communities. The Declaration of Independence and the preamble to the Constitution were expressions of the philosophy of American government, *not* of the "American way of life," which has never been as secular, as individualistic, as utopian as the written documents might lead one to believe. Between ideology and reality there is a hiatus, across which there occasionally drifts a venerable rhetoric which has learned to breathe, and even thrive, in just this vacancy. It is the kind of rhetoric that we are all familiar with, and of which the above quotation from Mr. Thistlethwaite is a good example. It was invented, or rather imported by the Founding Fathers, and has been hallowed by repetition ever since. Most Americans think they really believe it, and most American intellectuals do believe it. Most people outside America also believe it, are always measuring America's performance by this ideal, and are always inevitably discovering that there is an unpleasant remainder left over in the real world.

An instance in point is America's immigration policy. The quota system, introduced after the First World War, is generally regarded as a repudiation of one of the most marvellous aspects of the American heritage. "The idea of the United States as an asylum and an experiment gave place to that of a folk society," Mr. Thistlethwaite says reproachfully; and this reproach is a common one, both outside and within the United States. But whose "idea" was it in the first place? There is no country which, without some overriding purpose, would welcome the mass entry of foreign-speaking immigrants. People don't like to be inundated by a tide of strangers, and the Americans are in this respect no different from Welshmen or Yorkshiremen. I do not know how to go about proving it, but I am almost certain that, at any time in the past hundred years, a sample of American public opinion would have shown a majority for curtailing and regulating immigration. In the event, up until 1918, policy and not opinion prevailed. But the process obviously could not go on for ever, and it is unreasonable to condemn it for not having done so. I would not wish to gloss over the harsh inequities of the present quota

system. I simply want to call attention to the way in which a perfectly natural development comes to be seen through an ideological haze as a calamitous fall from grace.

Lest I be misunderstood: there *is* a sense in which the United States can fairly be said to be a great experiment. It is an experiment in establishing a republican and democratic form of government over a vast continent with a heterogeneous population. Miraculously enough, the experiment has succeeded. But American history has never been, and never will be, a Promethean effort to establish "a society fluid and experimental, uncommitted to rigid values." American society has certainly been fluid, for all sorts of reasons, most of them outside of human control; it has never been "experimental," except when circumstances forced it to be; and it has been committed to fairly rigid values ever since it began. In other words, America is different—in many ways fantastically different—from other countries. But it is not so different as to be out of this world. God's country or not, it is still like unto the nations.

"In the mid-twentieth century the American people still pursue their Revolutionary ideal," writes Mr. Thistlethwaite. This is a proposition almost any American will assent to. For F. Scott Fitzgerald, France was a land, England a people, but America was "a willingness of the heart." To this proposition, too, Americans will assent. They will, indeed, assent to any proposition that in a vague and high-sounding way presents America as something that holds an infinite and beautiful promise. This is the American *mystique*; Americans are naturally fond of it. But the American *mystique* is not America, though it is indisputably American.

EVEN the American liberal intellectual is beginning to appreciate the force of this distinction. In his new and brilliant book, *The Age of Reform*,* the Columbia historian, Richard Hofstadter, observes that American liberals today "find themselves far more conscious of those things they would like to preserve than they are of those things they would like to change." And he goes on to remark: . . . Americans do not abide very quietly the evils of life. We are forever restlessly pitting

* *The Age of Reform. From Bryan to F. D. R.* By RICHARD HOFSTADTER. Alfred A. Knopf (New York). \$4.50.

Life and Art in Moscow

From **KENNETH TYNAN**

MOSCOW NOVEMBER 19th
IN Leningrad on Thursday I signed a customs form vouching that my baggage contained no antelope horns, hashish or Manchurian beer, and was allowed to go on to Moscow, where Mr. Peter Brook's "Hamlet" company, the first English theatrical troupe to arrive since the Revolution, will open on Wednesday.

Moscow is a vast convention of warehouses, held on an open plain. The new university reminds one of the Rockefeller Centre in New York, and at night the whole city suggests America, strangely stripped of bars and advertisements. How comfort-

ing, in memory, is neon lighting, symbol of salesmanship and hence of ingratiating! By day the great impersonal squares unfold; there must be six open places in Moscow where the Battle of Waterloo could be fought without breaking a single window. All colour and drama are indoors—except for St. Basil's Cathedral which is Brighton Pavilion in warpaint—and as far as I can see the only thing in Moscow which wears makeup. The squares surge with purposeful, apple-cheeked faces, conversing in condensed steam, and there are hundreds of Chinese faces, many of them belonging to Chinese.

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**Kenneth Tynan is one of a team of expert writers
who contribute each week to**

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ourselves against them. . . . This restlessness is most valuable and had its most successful consequences wherever dealing with *things* is involved, in technology and invention, in productivity, in the ability to meet needs and provide comforts. . . . But in dealing with human beings and institutions, in matters of morals and politics, the limits of this undying, absolutistic restlessness quickly become evident.

In the course of developing this thesis, Professor Hofstadter is able to show how the history of modern American reform movements has an ambiguous character: they did much that was good and necessary, but they also set in motion energies that were anything but benign. The fact that a good part of the Populist movement ended up in Senator McCarthy's camp indicates that the "restlessness" that the American *mystique* may generate can easily be transmuted into a superstitious anxiety which sees the world as governed by nefarious conspiracies and which, in a frenzy of frustration, then aims to achieve a wholly unnatural and artificial stability. Americans are a truly restless people,

but it has been the saving of American society that they are not all restless, all the time: a *perpetuum mobile* has its appeal to the imagination (especially the academic imagination), but it is something other than a civil order in which men can live. In a sense, Professor Hofstadter's book is a specific reaction to McCarthyism, for it is this recent unpleasantness that has stimulated the American liberal mind to a recognition that American liberties could be threatened by an agitated populace and preserved by "hide-bound" institutions.

America has its mysteries, as do other countries. These mysteries are not to be explained in European terms, any more than European mysteries can be explained in American terms (as many Americans seem to think). America also has its *mystique*, as have other countries. But to conceive American reality in terms of this *mystique* makes as much sense as conceiving of French reality in terms of "the French mission"—a confusion which both Frenchmen and Americans engage in, however, with disastrous results.

Irving Kristol

IN STARS OR IN OURSELVES?

WHAT causes a poet to influence his contemporaries or his juniors? Is it merit? Or originality? Or oddness? Or has it little to do with the poet's own productions? Is it one more manifestation of these secret activities which can be removed from the field of individual decision by the eternal alibi of the *Zeitgeist*?

These questions are raised by a reading of the verse of two very fine poets who both published a good deal during the thirties and who are therefore old enough for it to be possible that their work should affect those who are only beginning to write or to publish. Of the two, Mr. William Empson* has found himself the unwilling headmaster of a whole school of promising or accomplished

young versifiers, while the other, Mr. F. T. Prince,* is appreciated by no more than a small, though distinguished, section of the poetry-reading public.

Mr. Empson's influence is partly accounted for by the fact that he is one of the greatest of contemporary critics; and there is a singularly close connection between his critical prose and his creative activity. Some of his poems could almost be taken as carefully designed illustrations of critical principles. He has also been able to draw attention to the merits (and perhaps to over-estimate them) of those metaphysical poets, like Donne and Marvell, who provide the chief sources of his own technical repertoire. In this indirect way

* *Collected Poems*. By WILLIAM EMPSON. Chatto and Windus. 10s. 6d.

* *Poems*. By F. T. PRINCE. Faber. 5s.

Soldiers Bathing. By F. T. PRINCE. Fortune Press. 8s. 6d.